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THE HOUSE CENTIPEDE.[1]

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GENERAL APPEARANCE AND HABITS.

The house centipede (fig. 1), particularly within the last 20 or 25 years, has become altogether too common an object in dwelling houses in the Middle and Northern States for the peace of mind of the inmates. It is a very fragile creature capable of very rapid movements, and elevated considerably above the surface upon which it runs by very numerous long legs. It may often be seen darting across floors with very great speed, occasionally stopping suddenly and remaining absolutely motionless, presently to resume its rapid movements, often darting directly at inmates of the house, particularly women, evidently with a desire to conceal itself beneath their dresses, and thus creating much consternation. The creature is not a true insect, but belongs to the Myriapoda, commonly known as centipedes or "thousand legs," and is sometimes called the "skein" centipede, from the fact that when crushed or motionless it looks, from its numerous long legs, like a mass of filaments or threads. It is a creature of the damp, and is particularly abundant in bathrooms, moist closets, and cellars, multiplying excessively also in conservatories, especially about places where pots are stored, and near heating pipes. In houses it will often be dislodged from behind furniture or be seen to run rapidly across the room, either in search of food or concealment. If examined closely its very cleanly habits may occasionally be manifested in that it may be observed to pass its long legs, one after another, through its mandibles, to remove any adhering dust. Its rather weird appearance, its peculiar manner of locomotion, and frequently its altogether too friendly way of approaching people, give it great interest, and with its increasing abundance in the North, make it a subject of frequent inquiry.

Note.—This bulletin is of interest to housewives throughout the United States. It is a reprint of Bureau of Entomology Circular 48.

[1] *Scutigera forcepe* Raf.

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FORMER AND PRESENT DISTRIBUTION.

The house centipede is a Southern species, its normal habitat being in the southern tier of States and southwestward through Texas into Mexico. It has slowly spread northward, having been observed in Pennsylvania as early as 1849, and reaching New York and Massachusetts 30 or 35 years ago, but for many years after its first appearance in the latter two States it was of rare occurrence. It is now very common throughout New York and the New England States, and extends westward well beyond the Mississippi, probably to the mountains.

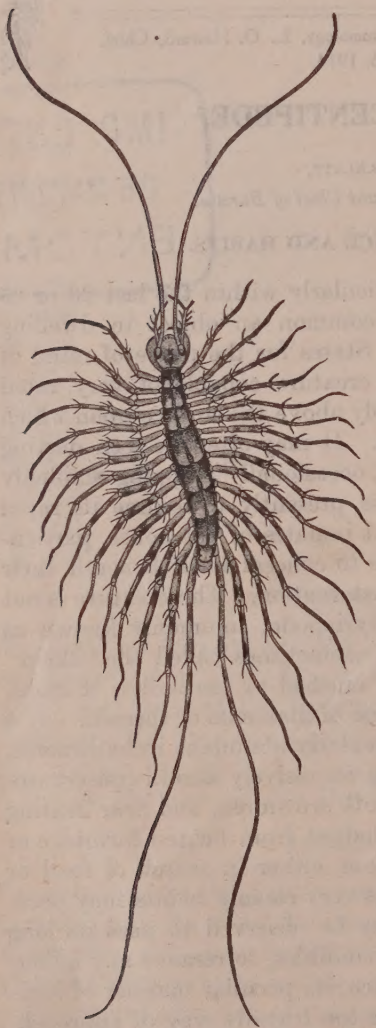

FIG. 1.—The house centipede (*Scutigera forceps*): Adult. Natural size. (Author's illustration.)

DESCRIPTION AND FOOD HABITS.

It is a very delicate creature, and it is almost impossible to catch it, even should one desire to do so, without dismembering several of its numerous legs, or crushing it. If captured, so that it can be more readily examined, it will be found to consist of a worm-like body of an inch or a little more in length, armed at the head with a pair of very long, slender antennæ, and along the sides with a fringe of fifteen pairs of long legs. The last pair is much longer than the others, in the female more than twice the length of the body. In color it is of a grayish yellow, marked above with three longitudinal dark stripes. Examination of its mouth parts shows that they are very powerful, and fitted for biting, indicating a predatory or carnivorous habit.

The indications of its mouth parts are borne out by its food habits, besides being indicated by the known food habits of the other members of the group of centipedes to which it belongs. It was inferred, before any direct observations were made, that its food was probably house flies, roaches, and any other insect inhabitants of dwellings.

Later many direct observations have confirmed this inference, and in captivity, on the authority of Prof. Hargitt, it feeds readily on roaches, house flies, and other insects. Miss Murtfeldt reports also having observed specimens devouring small moths. During the act of devouring a moth they kept their numerous long legs vibrating with incredible swiftness, so as to give the appearance of a hazy spot or space surrounding the fluttering moth.[1] It is supposed also to feed on the bedbug, and doubtless will eat any insect which it captures, and its quickness and agility leave few insects safe from it.

Fletcher and Howard have observed its mode of capturing the croton bug, which is interesting as illustrating the habits of this centipede and its allies. In this instance the centipede sprang over its prey, inclosing and caging it with its many legs. In its habit of springing after its prey this centipede is similar to spiders, which it also resembles in its rapacious habits. It would therefore seem to be a very efficient enemy of many of our house pests. The common idea that it probably feeds on household goods and woolens or other clothing has no basis in fact.

THE BITE OF THE HOUSE CENTIPEDE.

The popular belief is that this centipede is extremely poisonous, and, as it belongs with the poisonous group of centipedes, it can not be questioned but that the bite of the creature is probably somewhat poisonous as well as painful, though the seriousness of the results will be dependent, as in all similar cases, on the susceptibility of the patient. The poison injected in the act of biting is probably merely to assist in numbing and quieting its victim, and in spite of its abundance in houses in the North, and for many years its much greater abundance in the South, very few cases are recorded of its having bitten any human being, and it is very questionable whether it would ever, unprovoked, attack any large animal. If pressed with the bare foot or hand, or if caught between sheets in beds, this, like almost any other insect, will unquestionably bite in self-defense, and the few cases on record indicate that severe swelling and pain may result from the poison injected. Prompt dressing of the wound with ammonia will greatly alleviate the disagreeable symptoms.

THE EARLY STAGES OF THE CENTIPEDE.

Little is known of the early life history of this myriapod. It is found in the adult state in houses during practically the entire year. Half-grown individuals are also found frequently during the summer. A newly-born specimen, found by H. G. Hubbard in the insectary

[1]Murtfeldt, Mary E. Entomological Memoranda for 1893. U. S. Dept. Agr., Div. Ent., Insect Life, vol. 6, No. 3, p. 257-259, February, 1894. "*Scutigera forceps* and Callimorpha," p. 258.

of the United States Department of Agriculture under a moist section of a log, differed from the older forms chiefly in possessing fewer legs. Its characteristics are indicated in figure 2. A very interesting feature of this specimen is that the terminal segment of the body contains the long posterior legs folded up within it as indicated at figure 2, *c*. They are doubtless liberated at the next molting. In the half-grown and later stages this centipede does not differ materially from the adult, except in size, and its habits throughout life are probably subject to little variation.

REMEDIES.

If it were not for its uncanny appearance, which is hardly calculated to inspire confidence, especially when it is darting at one with great

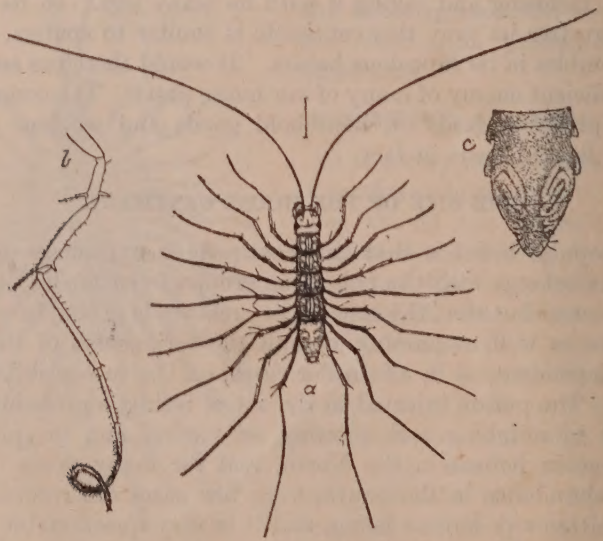

FIG. 2.—The house centipede: *a*. Newly hatched individual; *b*, one of legs of same; *c*, terminal segment of body showing undeveloped legs coiled up within. All enlarged. (Author's illustration.)

speed, and the rather poisonous nature of its bite, it would not necessarily be an unwelcome visitor in houses, but, on the contrary, might be looked upon rather as an aid in keeping in check various household pests. Its appearance in dwellings, however, will not often be welcomed notwithstanding its useful rôle. It can be best controlled by promptly destroying all the individuals which make their appearance, and by keeping the moist places in houses free from any object behind which it can conceal itself, or at least subjecting such locations to frequent inspection. In places near water pipes, or in storerooms where it may secrete itself and occur in some numbers, a free use of fresh pyrethrum powder is to be advised.

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